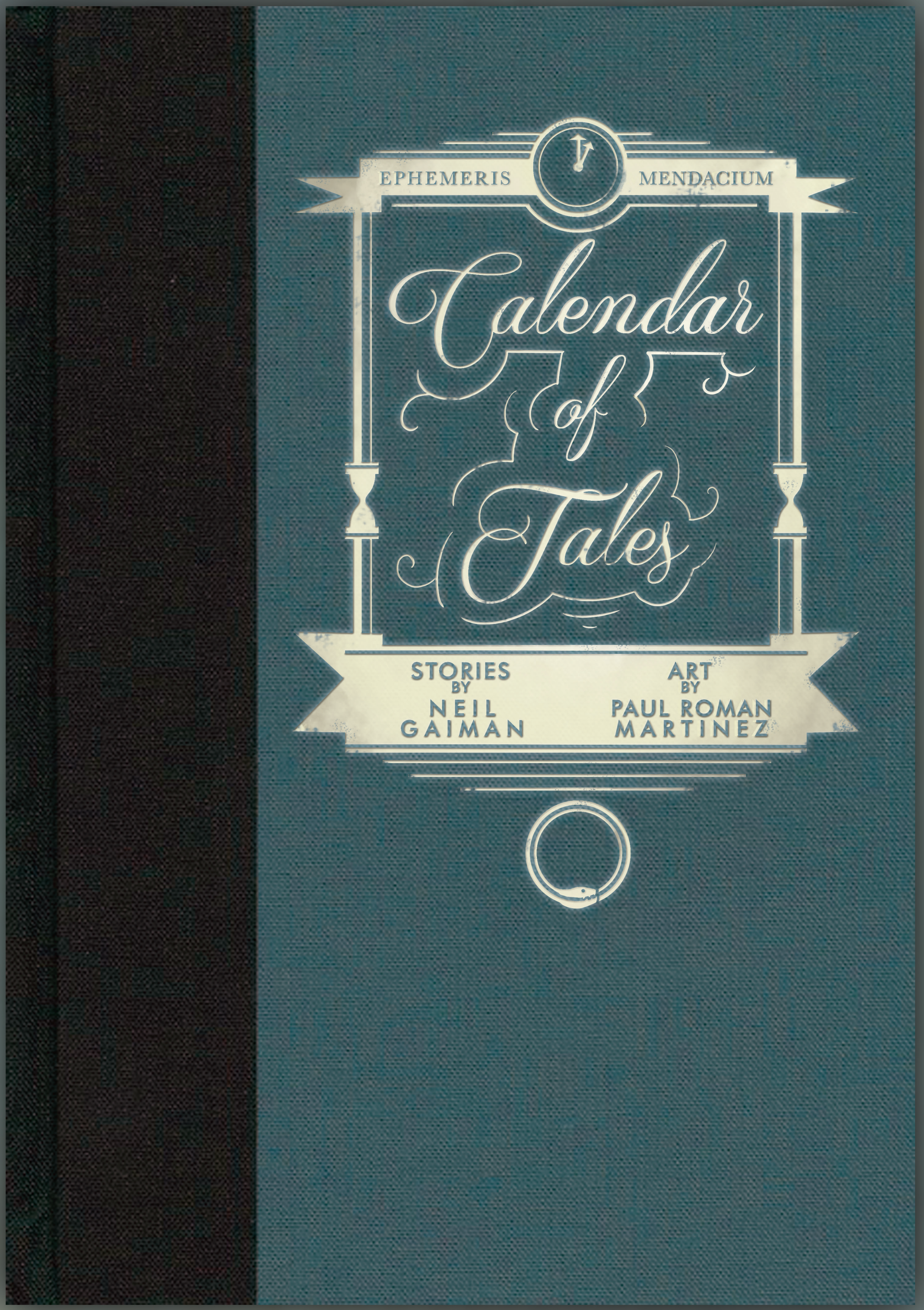

EPHEMERIS MENDACIUM

Calendar of Tales

STORIES BY NEIL GAIMAN

ART BY PAUL ROMAN MARTINEZ

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Calendar of Tales

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• INTRODUCTION •

On February 4th, 2013, Neil Gaiman embarked on a fantastic art project in partnership with BlackBerry and millions of his fans. He tweeted twelve questions to the world, one for each month of the year. From the tens of thousands of responses he received, Neil picked his favourite answers and wrote twelve short stories inspired by them. Releasing these back into the world, comic artist Paul Roman Martinez has created brand new illustrations for this revised edition of Calendar of Tales.

www.neverwear.net

January

I

Whap!
"Is it always like this?" The kid seemed disoriented. He was glancing around the room, unfocused. That would get him killed, if he wasn't careful.

Twelve tapped him on the arm. "Nope. Not always. If there's any trouble, it'll come from up there."

He pointed to an attic door, in the ceiling above them. The door was askew, and the darkness waited behind it like an eye.

The kid nodded. Then he said, "How long have we got?"

"Together? Maybe another ten minutes."

"One thing I kept asking them at Base, they wouldn't answer. They said I'd see for myself. Who are they?"

Twelve didn't answer. Something had changed, ever-so-slightly, in the darkness of the attic above them. He touched his finger to his lips, then raised his weapon, and indicated for the kid to do likewise.

They came tumbling down from the attic-hole: brick-grey and mould-green, sharp-toothed and fast, so fast. The kid was still fumbling at the trigger when Twelve started shooting, and he took them out, all five of them, before the kid could fire a shot.

He glanced to his left. The kid was shaking.

"There you go," he said.

"I guess I mean, what are they?"

"What or who. Same thing. They're the enemy. Slipping in at the edges of time. Right now,

at handover, they're going to be coming out in force."

They walked down the stairs together. They were in a small, suburban house.
A woman and a man sat in the kitchen, at a table with a bottle of champagne upon it. They did not appear to notice the two men in uniform who walked through the room. The woman was pouring the champagne.

The kid's uniform was crisp and dark blue and looked unworn. His yearglass hung on his belt, full of pale sand. Twelve's uniform was frayed and faded to a blueish grey, patched up where it had been sliced into, or ripped, or burned. They reached the kitchen door and –

Whap!

They were outside, in a forest, somewhere very cold indeed.

"DOWN!" called Twelve.

The sharp thing went over their heads and crashed into a tree behind them.

The kid said, "I thought you said it wasn't always like this."
Twelve shrugged.

"Where are they coming from?"

"Time," said Twelve. "They're hiding behind the seconds, trying to get in."

In the forest close to them something went whumpf, and a tall fir tree began to burn with a flickering copper-green flame.

"Where are they?"

"Above us, again. They're normally above you or beneath you." They came down like sparks from a sparkler, beautiful and white and possibly slightly dangerous.

The kid was getting the hang of it. This time the two of them fired together.

"Did they brief you?" asked Twelve. As they landed, the sparks looked less beautiful and much more dangerous.

"Not really. They just told me that it was only for a year."

Twelve barely paused to reload. He was grizzled and scarred. The kid looked barely old enough to pick up a weapon. “Did they tell you that a year would be v lifetime?”

The kid shook his head. Twelve remembered when he was a kid like this, his uniform clean and unburned. Had he ever been so fresh-faced? So innocent?

He dealt with five of the spark-demons. The kid took care of the remaining three.

“So it’s a year of fighting,” said the kid.
“Second by second,” said Twelve.

Whap!

The waves crashed on the beach. It was hot here, a Southern hemisphere January. It was still night, though. Above them fireworks hung in the sky, unmoving. Twelve checked his yearglass: there were only a couple of grains left. He was almost done.

He scanned the beach, the waves, the rocks.

“I don’t see it,” he said.

“I do,” said the kid.

It rose from the sea as he pointed, something huge beyond the mind’s holding, all bulk and malevolent vastness, all tentacles and claws, and it roared as it rose.

Twelve had the rocket launcher off his back and over his shoulder. He fired it, and watched as flame blossomed on the creature’s body.

“Biggest I’ve seen yet,” he said. “Maybe they save the best for last.”

“Hey,” said the kid, “I’m only at the beginning.”

It came for them then, crab-claws flailing and snapping, tentacles lashing, maw opening and vainly closing. They sprinted up the sandy ridge.

The kid was faster than Twelve: he was young, but sometimes that’s an advantage. Twelve’s knee ached, and he stumbled. His final grain of sand was falling through the yearglass when something – a tentacle, he figured – wrapped itself around his leg, and he fell.

He looked up.

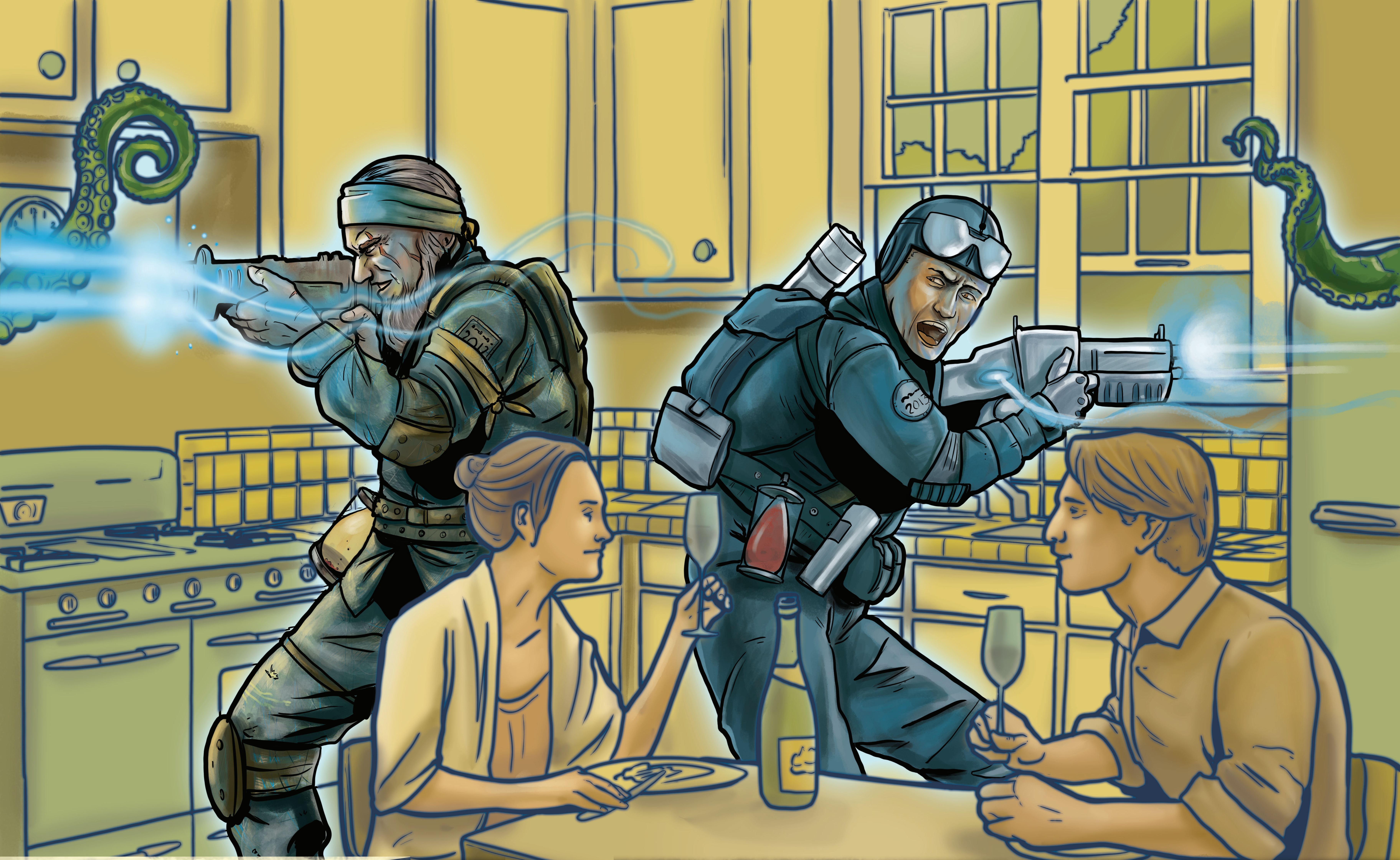
The kid was standing on the ridge, feet planted like they teach you in boot camp, holding a rocket launcher of unfamiliar design, something after Twelve’s time, he assumed. He began mentally to say his goodbyes as he was hauled down the beach, sand scraping his face, and then a dull bang and the tentacle was whipped from his leg as the creature was blown backwards, into the sea.

He was tumbling through the air as the final grain fell and Midnight took him.

Twelve opened his eyes in the place the old years go. Fourteen helped him down from the dais.

“How’d it go?” asked Nineteen Fourteen. She wore a floor-length white skirt and long, white gloves.

“They’re getting more dangerous every year,” said Twenty Twelve. “The seconds, and the things behind them. But I like the new kid. I think he’s going to do fine.”



@neilhimself
"Why is January so dangerous?"

I

@zyblonius
"Because an aging veteran just retired, to be replaced by a dangerously unqualified youth, no more than a babe in arms."

February

II

Grey February skies, misty white sands, black rocks, and the sea seemed black too, like a monochrome photograph, with only the girl in the yellow raincoat adding any colour to the world.

Twenty years ago the old woman had walked the beach in all weathers, bowed over, staring at the sand, occasionally bending, laboriously, to lift a rock and look beneath it. When she had stopped coming down to the sands, a middle-aged woman, her daughter I assumed, came, and walked the beach with less enthusiasm than her mother. Now that woman had stopped coming, and in her place there was the girl.

She came towards me. I was the only other person on the beach in that mist.
I don't look much older than her.

"What are you looking for?" I called.

She made a face. "What makes you think I'm looking for anything?"

"You come down here every day. Before you it was the lady, before her the very old lady, with the umbrella."

"That was my grandmother," said the girl in the yellow raincoat.

"What did she lose?"

"A pendant."

"It must be very valuable."

"Not really. It has sentimental value."

"Must be worth more than that, if your family has been looking for it for umpteen years."

"Yes." She hesitated. Then she said, "Grandma said it would take her home again. She said she only came here to look around. She was curious. And then she got worried about having the pendant on her, so she hid it under a rock, so she'd be able to find it again, when she got back. And then, when she got back, she wasn't sure which rock it was, not any more. That was fifty years ago."

"Where was her home?"

"She never told us."

The way the girl was talking made me ask the question that scared me. "Is she still alive? Your grandmother?"

"Yes. Sort of. But she doesn't talk to us any more. She just stares out at the sea.
It must be horrible to be so old."

I shook my head. It isn't. Then I put my hand into my coat pocket and held it out to her. "Was it anything like this? I found it on this beach a year ago. Under a rock."

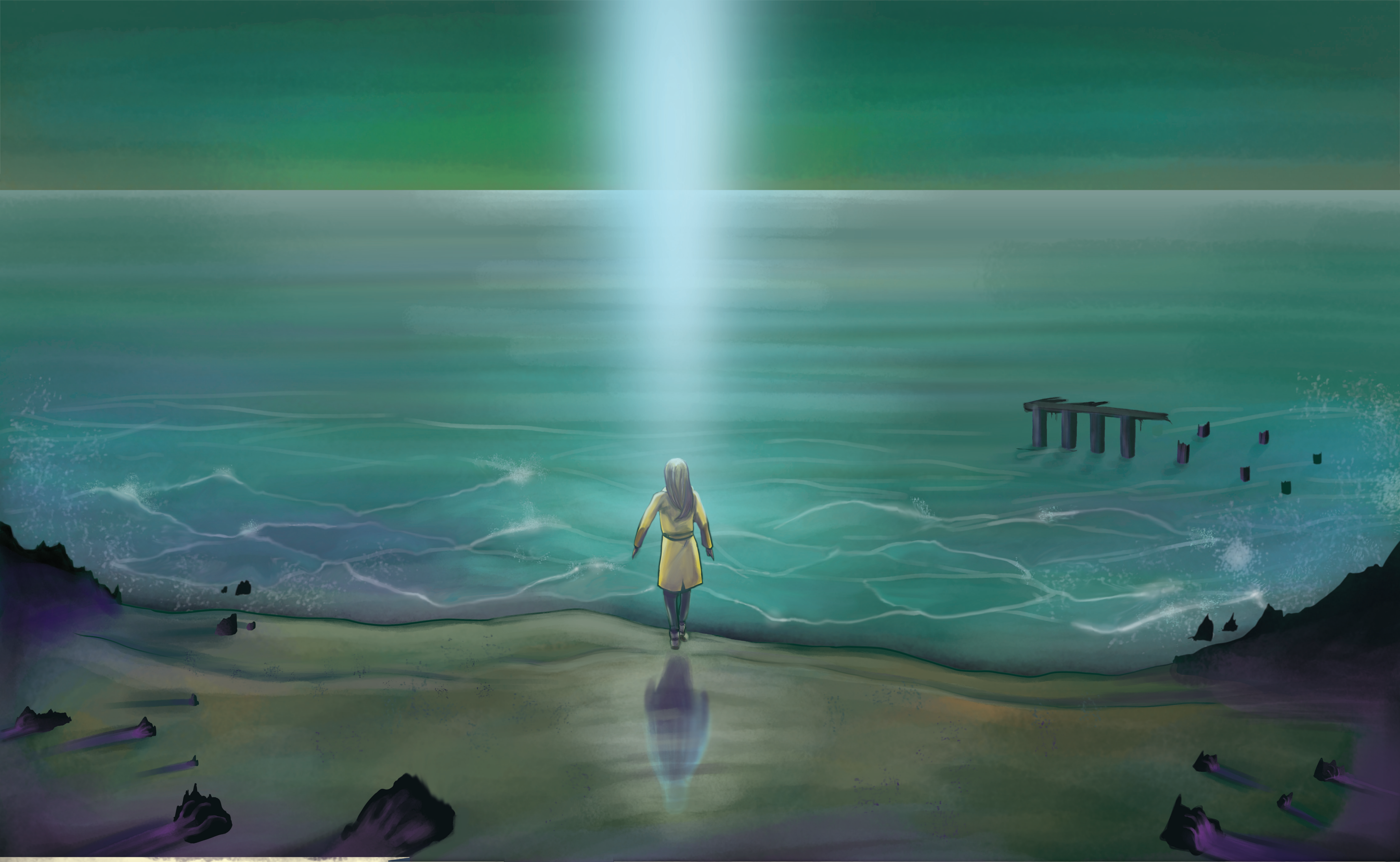
The pendant was untarnished by sand or by saltwater.

The girl looked amazed, then she hugged me, and thanked me, and she took the pendant, and ran up the misty beach, in the direction of the little town.

I watched her go: a splash of gold in a black and white world. Carrying her grandmother's pendant in her hand. It was a twin to the one I wore around my own neck.

I wondered about her grandmother, my little sister, whether she would ever go home; whether she would forgive me for the joke I had played on her if she did. Perhaps she would elect to stay on the earth, and would send the girl home in her place. That might be fun.

Only when my great-niece was gone and I was alone, did I swim upward, letting the pendant pull me home, up into the vastness above us, where we wander with the lonely sky-whales and the skies and seas are one.



"What's the strangest thing that ever happened to you in February?" @neilhimself

II

@TheAstralGypsy

"Met a girl on beach, searching for her grandma's pendant, lost 50 years ago. I had it, found previous Feb."

March

III

"…only this we know, that she was not executed."
Daniel Defoe, A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates

It was too warm in the great house, and so the two of them went out onto the porch. A spring storm was brewing far to the west. Already the flicker of lightning, and the unpredictable chilly gusts blew about them and cooled them. They sat decorously on the porch swing, the mother and the daughter, and they talked of when the woman's husband would be home, for he had taken ship with a tobacco crop to faraway England.

Mary, who was thirteen, so pretty, so easily startled, said, "I do declare. I am glad that all the pirates have gone to the gallows, and father will come back to us safely."

Her mother's smile was gentle, and it did not fade as she said. "I do not care to talk about pirates, Mary."

**

She was dressed as a boy when she was a girl, to cover up her father's scandal. She did not wear a woman's dress until she was on the ship with her father, and with her mother, his serving-girl mistress, whom he would call wife in the New World, and they were on their way from Cork to the Carolinas.

She fell in love for the first time, on that journey, enveloped in unfamiliar cloth, clumsy in her strange skirts. She was eleven, and it was no sailor who took her heart but the ship itself: Anne would sit in the bows, watching the grey Atlantic roll beneath them, listening to the gulls scream, and feeling Ireland recede with each moment, taking with it all the old lies.

She left her love when they landed, with regret, and even as her father prospered in the new land she dreamed of the creak and slap of the sails.

Her father was a good man. He had been pleased when she had returned, and did not speak of her time away: the young man whom she had married, how he had taken her to Providence. She had returned to her family three years after, with a baby at her breast. Her husband had died, she said, and although tales and rumours abounded, even the sharpest of the gossiping tongues did not think to suggest that Annie Riley was the pirate-girl Anne Bonny, Red Rackam's first mate.

"If you had fought like a man, you would not have died like a dog." Those had been Anne Bonny's last words to the man who put the baby in her belly, or so they said.

**

Mrs Riley watched the lightning play, and heard the first rumble of distant thunder. Her hair was greying now, and her skin just as fair as any local woman of property.

"It sounds like cannon-fire," said Mary (Anne had named her for her own mother, and for her best friend in the years she was away from the great house).

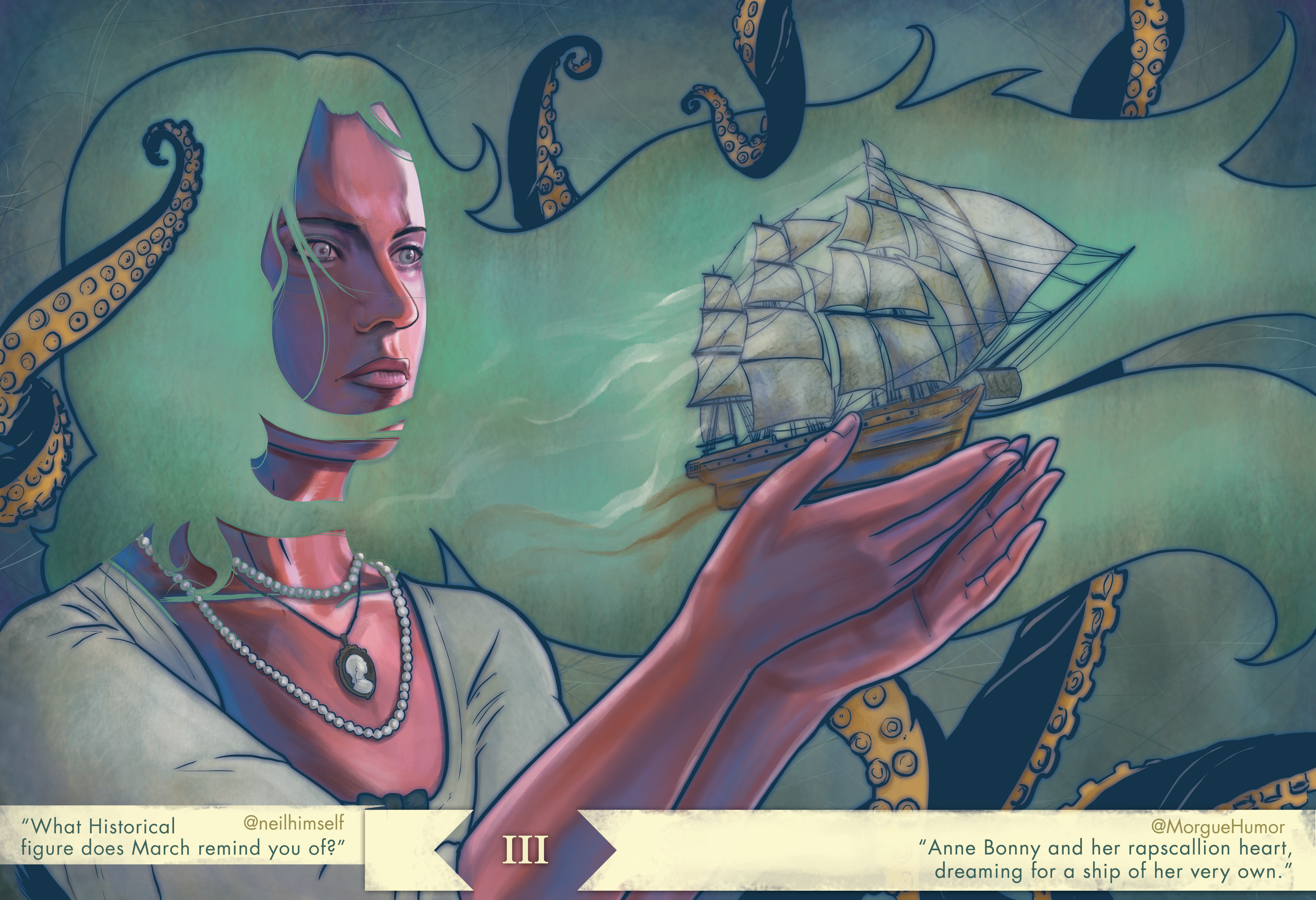
"Why would you say such things?" asked her mother, primly. "In this house, we do not speak of cannon-fire."

The first of the March rain fell, then, and Mrs Riley surprised her daughter by getting up from the porch swing and leaning into the rain, so it splashed her face like sea-spray. It was quite out of character for a woman of such respectability.

As the rain splashed her face she thought herself there: the captain of her own ship, the cannonade around them, the stench of the gunpowder smoke blowing on the salt breeze. Her ship's deck would be painted red, to mask the blood in battle. The wind would fill her billowing canvas with a snap as loud as a cannon's roar, as they prepared to board the merchant ship, and take whatever they wished, jewels or coin – and burning kisses with her first mate when the madness was done...

"Mother?" said Mary. "I do believe you must be thinking of a great secret. You have such a strange smile on your face."

"Silly girl, acushla," said her mother. And then she said, "I was thinking of your father." She spoke the truth, and the March winds blew madness about them.



"What Historical figure does March remind you of?"

@neilhimself

III

@MorgueHumor

"Anne Bonny and her rapscallion heart, dreaming for a ship of her very own."

April

IV

You know you've been pushing the ducks too hard when they stop trusting you, and my father had been taking the ducks for everything he could since the previous summer.

He'd walk down to the pond. "Hey ducks," he'd say to the ducks.

By January they'd just swim away. One particularly irate drake – we called him Donald, but only behind his back, ducks are sensitive to that kind of thing – would hang around and berate my father. "We ain't interested," he'd say. "We don't want to buy nothing you're selling: not life insurance, not encyclopedias, not aluminum siding, not safety matches, and especially not damp-proofing."

"'Double or nothing'!" quacked a particularly indignant mallard. "Sure, you'll toss us for it. With a double-sided quarter...!"

The ducks, who had got to examine the quarter in question when my father had dropped it into the pond, all honked in agreement, and drifted elegantly and grumpily to the other side of the pond.

My father took it personally. "Those ducks," he said. "They were always there. Like a cow you could milk. They were suckers – the best kind. The kind you could go back to again and again. And I queered the pitch."

"You need to make them trust you again," I told him. "Or better still, you could just start being honest. Turn over a new leaf. You have a real job now."

He worked at the village inn, opposite the duckpond.

My father did not turn over a new leaf. He barely even turned over the old leaf. He stole fresh bread from the inn kitchens, he took unfinished bottles of red wine, and he went down to the duckpond to win the ducks' trust.

All of March he entertained them, he fed them, he told them jokes, he did whatever he could to soften them up. It was not until April, when the world was all puddles, and the trees were new and green and the world had shaken off winter, that he brought out a pack of cards.

"How about a friendly game?" asked my father. "Not for money?"

The ducks eyed each other nervously. "I don't know..." some of them muttered, warily.

Then one elderly mallard I did not recognise extended a wing graciously. "After so much fresh bread, after so much good wine, we would be churlish to refuse your offer. Perhaps, gin rummy? Or happy families?"
"How about poker?" said my father, with his poker face on, and the ducks said yes.

My father was so happy. He didn't even have to suggest that they start playing for money, just to make the game more interesting – the elderly mallard did that.

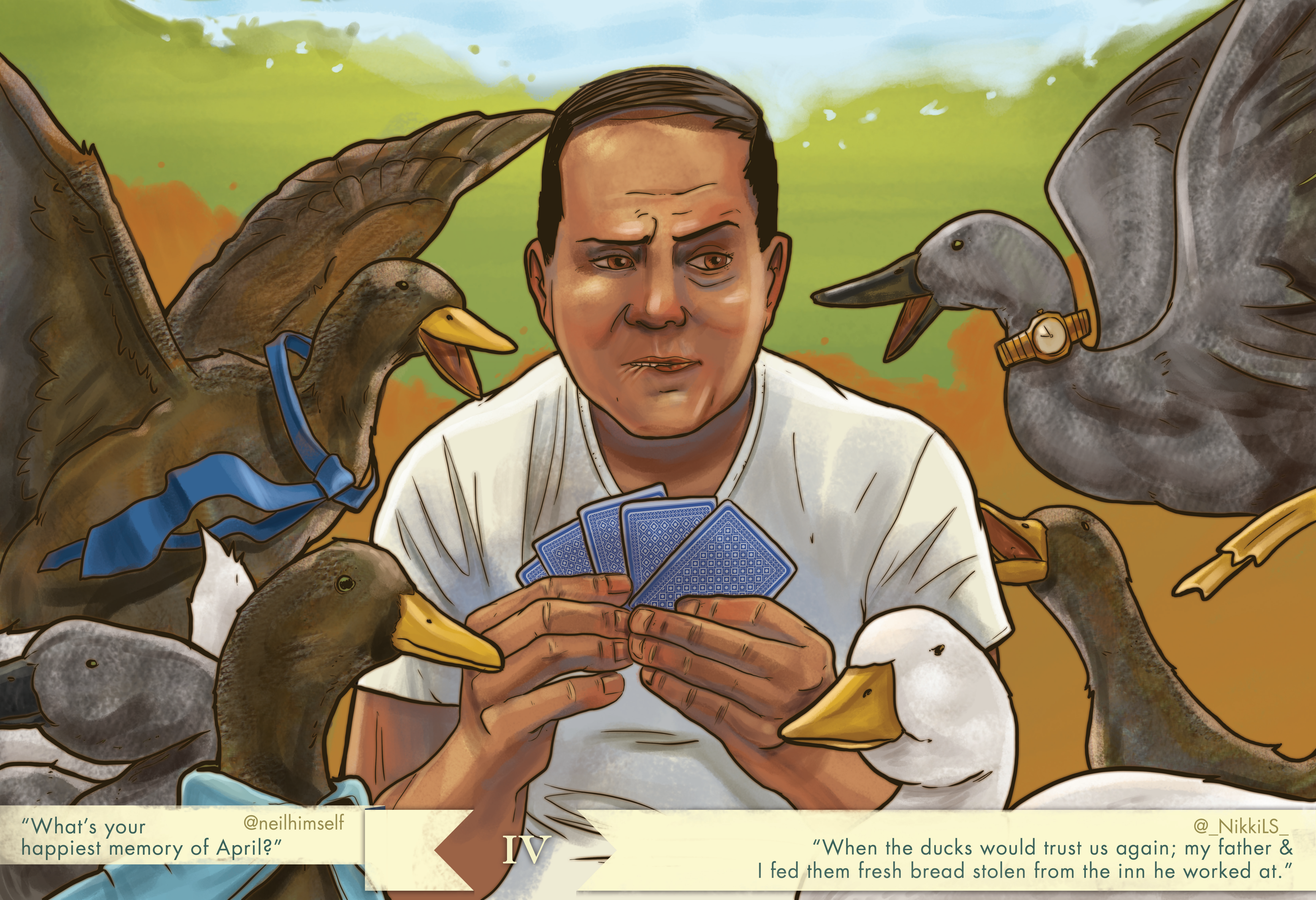
I'd learned a little over the years about dealing off the bottom: I'd watch my father sitting in our room at night, practising, over and over, but that old mallard could have taught my father a thing or two. He dealt from the bottom. He dealt from the middle. He knew where every card in that deck was, and it just took a flick of the wing to put them exactly where he wanted them.

The ducks took my father for everything: his wallet, his watch, his shoes, his snuffbox, and the clothes he stood up in. If the ducks had accepted a boy as a bet, he would have lost me as well, and perhaps, in a lot of ways, he did.

He walked back to the inn in just his underwear and socks. Ducks don't like socks, they said. It's a duck thing.

"At least you kept your socks," I told him.

That was the April that my father learned not to trust ducks.



"What's your happiest memory of April?"

@neilhimself

IV

@_NikkiLS_

"When the ducks would trust us again; my father & I fed them fresh bread stolen from the inn he worked at."

May

V

In May I received an anonymous Mother's Day card. This puzzled me. I would have noticed if I had ever had children, surely?

In June I found a notice saying "Normal Service will be Resumed as Soon as Possible" taped to my bathroom mirror, along with several small tarnished copper coins of uncertain denomination and origin.

In July I received three postcards, at weekly intervals, all postmarked from the Emerald City of Oz, telling me the person who sent them was having a wonderful time, and asking me to remind Doreen about changing the locks on the back door and to make certain that she had cancelled the milk. I do not know anyone named Doreen.

In August someone left a box of chocolates on my doorstep. It had a sticker attached saying it was evidence in an important legal case, and under no circumstances were the chocolates inside to be eaten before they had been dusted for fingerprints. The chocolates had melted in the August heat into a squidgy brown mass, and I threw the whole box away.

In September I received a package containing Action Comics #1, a First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays, and a privately published copy of a novel by Jane Austen I was unfamiliar with, called Wit and Wilderness. I have little interest in comics, Shakespeare or Jane Austen, and I left the books in the back bedroom. They were gone a week later, when I needed something to read in the bath, and went looking.

In October, I found a notice saying "Normal Service will be Resumed as Soon as Possible. Honest." taped to the side of the goldfish tank. Two of the goldfish appeared to have been taken and replaced by identical substitutes.

In November I received a ransom note telling me exactly what to do if ever I wished to see my Uncle Theobald alive again. I do not have an Uncle Theobald, but I wore a pink carnation in my button hole and ate nothing but salads for the entire month anyway.

In December I received a Christmas Card postmarked THE NORTH POLE, letting me know that, this year, due to a clerical error, I was on neither the Naughty nor the Nice list. It was signed with a name that began with an S.
It might have been Santa but it seemed more like Steve.

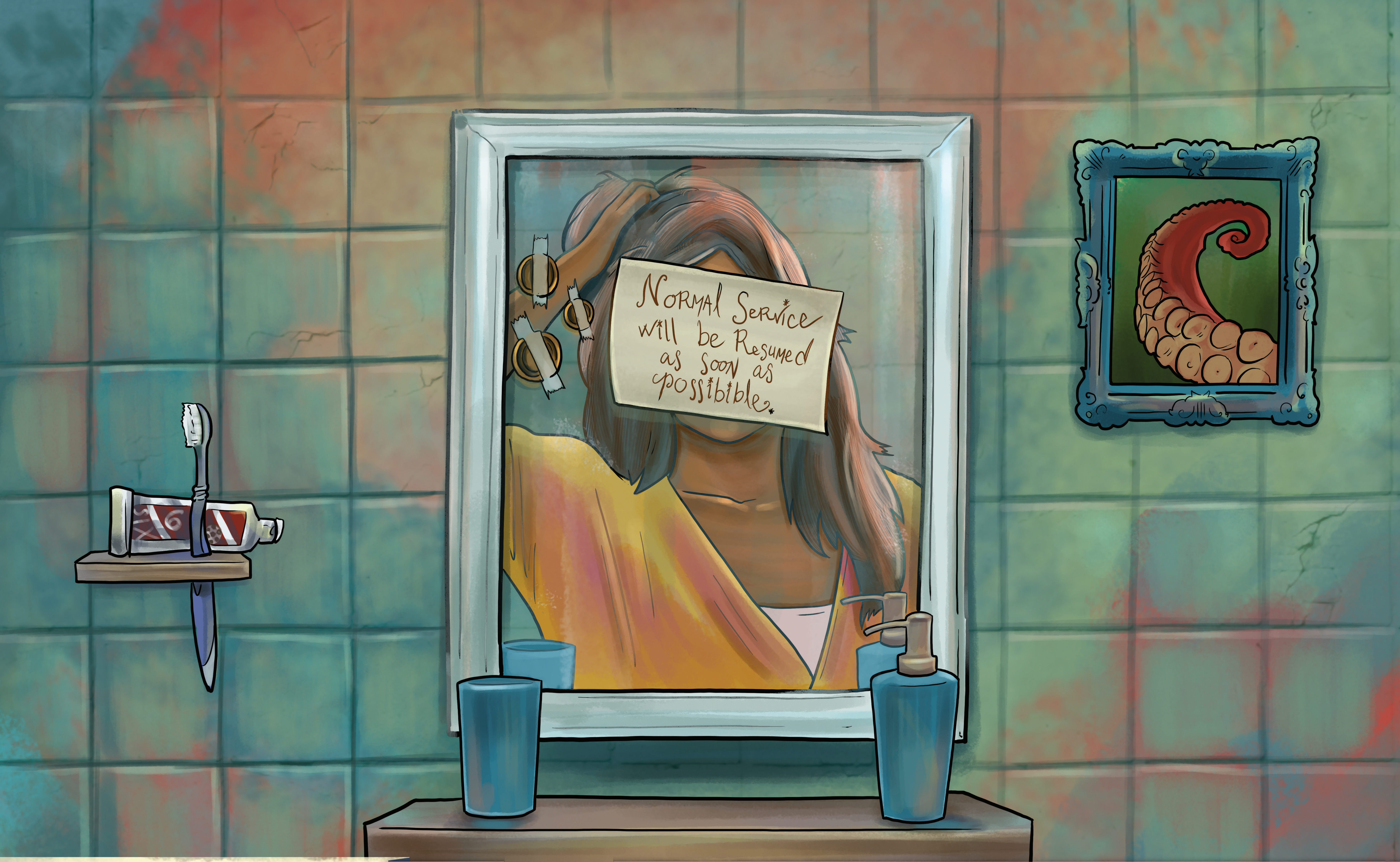
In January I woke to find someone had painted SECURE YOUR OWN MASK BEFORE HELPING OTHERS on the ceiling of my tiny kitchen, in vermilion paint. Some of the paint had dripped onto the floor.

In February a man came over to me at the bus-stop and showed me the black statue of a falcon in his shopping bag. He asked for my help keeping it safe from the Fat Man, and then he saw someone behind me and he ran away.

In March I received three pieces of junk mail, the first telling me I might have already won a million dollars, the second telling me that I might already have been elected to the Academie Francaise, and the last telling me I might already have been installed as the titular head of the Holy Roman Empire.

In April I found a note on my bedside table apologising for the problems in service, and assuring me that henceforth all faults in the universe had now been remedied forever. WE APOLOGIZE OF THE INCONVENIENTS, it concluded.

In May I received another Mother's Day Card. Not anonymous, this time.
It was signed, but I could not read the signature. It started with an S but it almost definitely wasn't Steve.


Normal Service
will be Resumed
as soon as
possibible.

"What's the weirdest gift you've ever been given in May?" @neilhimself

V

@StarlingV
"An anonymous Mother's Day gift.
Think about that for a moment."

June

VI

My parents disagree. It's what they do. They do more than disagree. They argue. About everything. I'm still not sure that I understand how they ever stopped arguing about things long enough to get married,let alone to have me and my sister.

My mum believes in the redistribution of wealth, and thinks that the big problem with Communism is it doesn't go far enough. My dad has a framed photograph of the Queen on his side of the bed, and he votes as Conservative as he can.
My mum wanted to name me Susan. My dad wanted to name me Henrietta, after his Aunt. Neither of them would budge an inch. I am the only Susietta in my school or, probably, anywhere. My sister's name is Alismima, for similar reasons.

There is nothing that they agree on, not even the temperature. My dad is always too hot, my mum always too cold. They turn the radiators on and off, open and close windows, whenever the other one goes out of the room. My sister and I get colds all year, and we think that's probably why.

They couldn't even agree on what month we'd go on holiday. Dad said definitely August, Mum said unquestionably July. Which meant we wound up having to take our summer holiday in June, inconveniencing everybody.

Then they couldn't decide where to go. Dad was set on Pony Trekking in Iceland, while Mum was only willing to compromise as far as a camelback caravan across the Sahara, and both of them simply looked at us as if we were being a bit silly when we suggested that we'd quite like to sit on a beach in the South of France or somewhere. They stopped arguing long enough to tell us that that wasn't going to happen, and neither was a trip to Disneyland, and then they went back to disagreeing with each other.

They finished the Where Are We Going For Our Holidays In June Disagreement by slamming a lot of doors and shouting a lot of things like "Right then!" at each other through them.

When the inconvenient holiday rolled around, my sister and I were only certain of one thing: we weren't going anywhere. We took a huge pile of books out of the library, as many as we could between us, and prepared to listen to lots of arguing for the next ten days. Then the men came in vans and brought things into the house and started to install them.

Mum had them put a sauna in the cellar. They poured masses of sand onto the floor. They hung a sunlamp from the ceiling. She put a towel on the sand beneath the sunlamp, and she'd lie down on it. She had pictures of sand dunes and camels taped to the cellar walls until they peeled off in the extreme heat.

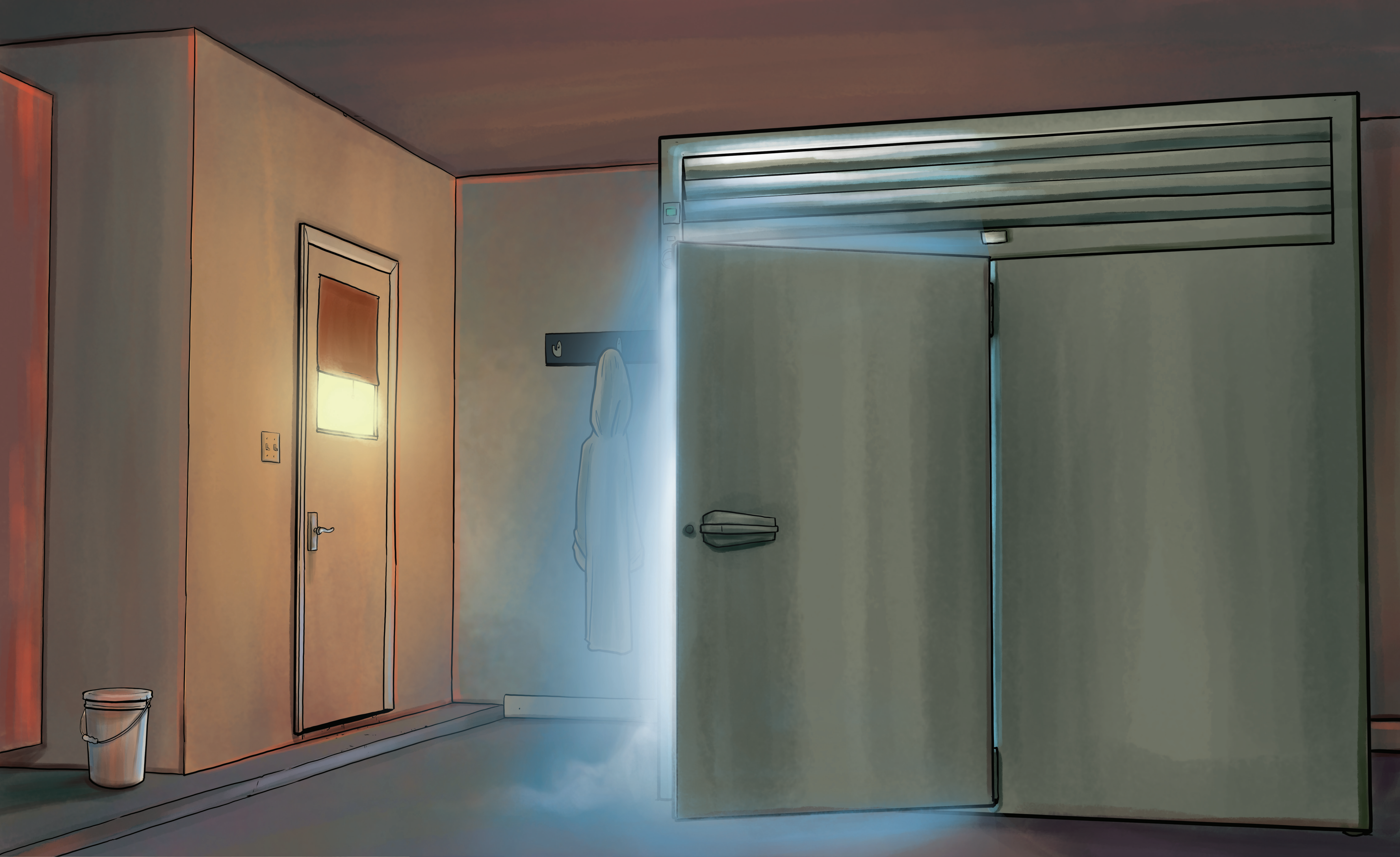
Dad had the men put the fridge – the biggest fridge he could find, so big you could walk into it – in the garage. It filled the garage so completely that he had to start parking the car in the driveway. He'd get up in the morning, dress warmly in a thick Icelandic wool sweater, he'd get a book and thermos-flask filled with
hot cocoa, and some Marmite and cucumber sandwiches, and he'd head in there in the morning with a huge smile on his face, and not come out until dinner.

I wonder if anybody else has a family as weird as mine. My parents never agree on anything at all.

"Did you know mum's been putting her coat on and sneaking into the garage in the afternoons?" said my sister suddenly, while we were sitting in the garden, reading our library books.

I didn't, but I'd seen dad wearing just his bathing trunks and dressing gown heading down into the cellar that morning to be with mum, with a big, goofy smile on his face.

I don't understand parents. Honestly, I don't think anybody ever does.



"Where would you spend a perfect June?" @neilhimself

VI

@DKSakar

"A refrigerator. Summertime always makes me wish they'd make large refrigerators that people could squeeze in."

July

VII

The day that my wife walked out on me, saying she needed to be alone and to have some time to think things over, on the first of July, when the sun beat down on the lake in the centre of the town, when the corn in the meadows that surrounded my house was knee-high, when the first few rockets and firecrackers were let off by over-enthusiastic children to startle us and to speckle the summer sky, I built an igloo out of books in my back yard.

I used paperbacks to build it, scared of the weight of falling hardbacks or encyclopedias if I didn't build it soundly.

But it held. It was twelve feet high, and had a tunnel, through which I could crawl to enter, to keep out the bitter arctic winds.

I took more books into the igloo I had made out of books, and I read in there. I marvelled at how warm and comfortable I was inside. As I read the books, I would put them down, making a floor out of them, and then I got more books, and I sat on them, eliminating the last of the green July grass from my world.

My friends came by the next day. They crawled on their hands and knees into my igloo. They told me I was acting crazy. I told them that the only thing that stood between me and the winter's cold was my father's collection of 1950s paperbacks, many of them with racy titles and lurid covers and disappointingly staid stories.

My friends left.

I sat in my igloo imagining the arctic night outside, wondering whether the Northern Lights would be filling the sky above me. I looked out, but saw only a night filled with pinprick stars.

I slept in my igloo made of books. I was getting hungry. I made a hole in the floor, lowered a fishing line and waited until something bit. I pulled it up: a fish made of books – green-covered vintage Penguin detective stories. I ate it raw, fearing a fire in my igloo.

When I went outside I observed that someone had covered the whole world with books: pale-covered books, all shades of white and blue and purple. I wandered the ice-floes of books.

I saw someone who looked like my wife out there on the ice. She was making a glacier of autobiographies.

"I thought you left me," I said to her. "I thought you left me alone."

She said nothing, and I realised that she was only a shadow of a shadow.

It was July, when the sun never sets in the arctic, but I was getting tired, and I started back towards the igloo.

I saw the shadows of the bears before I saw the bears themselves: huge they were, and pale, made of the pages of fierce books: poems ancient and modern prowled the ice floes in bear-shape, filled with words that could wound with their beauty.
I could see the paper, and the words winding across them, and I was frightened that the bears could see me.

I crept back to my igloo, avoiding the bears. I may have slept in the darkness. And then I crawled out, and I lay on my back on the ice and stared up at the unexpected colours of the shimmering Northern Lights, and listened to the cracks and snaps of the distant ice as an iceberg of fairy tales calved from a glacier of books on mythology.

I do not know when I became aware that there was someone else lying on the ground near to me. I could hear her breathing.

"They are very beautiful, aren't they?" she said.

"It is Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights," I told her.

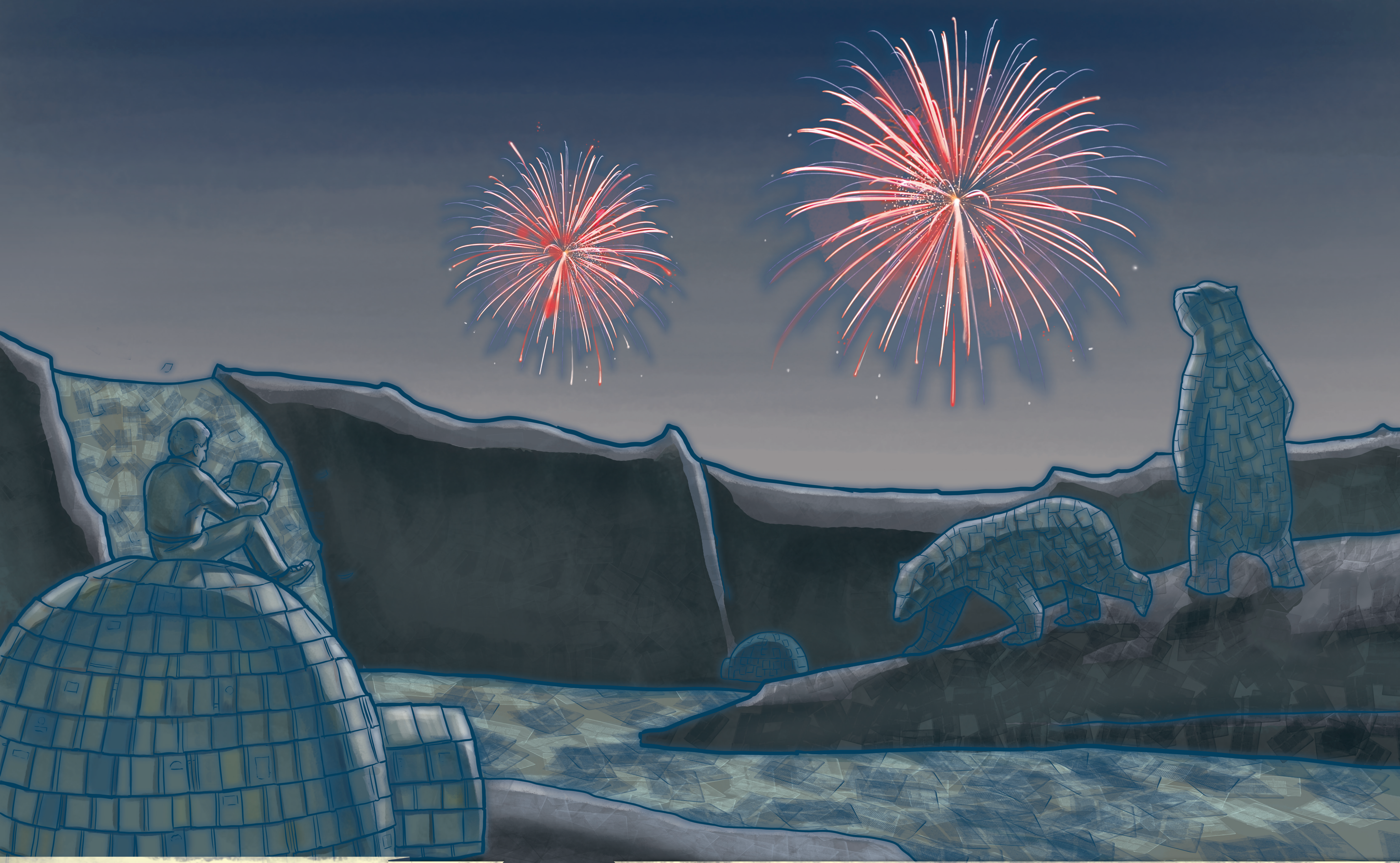
"It's the town's Fourth of July fireworks, baby," said my wife.

She held my hand and we watched the fireworks together.

When the last of the fireworks had vanished in a cloud of golden stars, she said, "I came home."

I didn't say anything. But I held her hand very tightly, and I left my igloo made of books, and I went with her back into the house we lived in, basking like a cat in the July heat.

I heard distant thunder, and in the night, while we slept, it began to rain, tumbling my igloo of books, washing away the words from the world.



"What is the most unusual thing you have ever seen in July?" @neilhimself

VII

@mendozacarla
"…an igloo made of books"

August

VIII

The forest fires started early that August. All the storms that might have dampened the world went south of us, and they took their rain with them. Each day we would see the helicopters going over above us, with their cargoes of lake water ready to drop on the distant flames.

Peter, who is Australian, and owns the house at which I live, cooking for him, and tending the place, said, "In Australia, the Eucalypts use fire to survive.
Some Eucalyptus seeds won't germinate unless a forest fire has gone through and cleared out all the undergrowth. They need the intense heat."

"Weird thought," I said. "Something hatching out of the flames."

"Not really," said Peter. "Very normal. Probably a lot more normal when the Earth was hotter."

"Hard to imagine a world any hotter than this."

He snorted. "This is nothing," he said, and then talked about intense heat he had experienced in Australia when he was younger.

The next morning the TV news said that people in our area were advised to evacuate their property: we were in a high risk area for fire.

"Load of old tosh," said Peter, crossly. "It'll never cause a problem for us.
We're on high ground, and we've got the creek all around us."

When the water was high, the creek could be four, even five feet deep. Now it was no more than a foot, two at the most.

By late afternoon, the smell of woodsmoke was heavy on the air, and the TV and the radio were both telling us to get out, now, if we could. We smiled at each other, and drank our beers, and congratulated each other on our understanding of a difficult situation, on not panicking, on not running away.

"We're complacent, humanity," I said. "All of us. People. We see the leaves cooking on the trees on a hot August day, and we still don't believe anything's really going to change. Our empires will go on for ever."

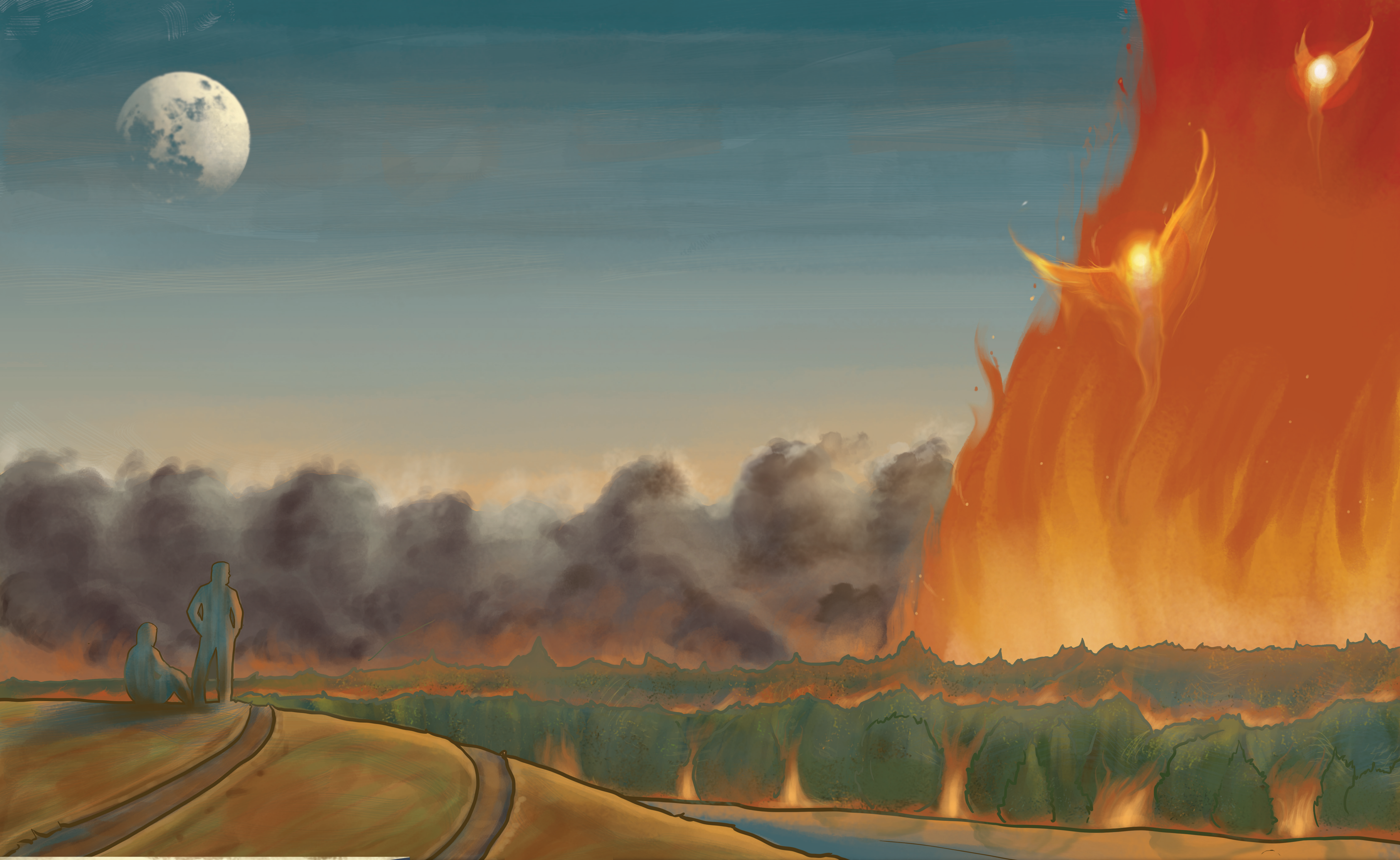
"Nothing lasts for ever," said Peter, and he poured himself another beer and told me about a friend of his back in Australia who had stopped a bushfire burning down the family farm by pouring beer on the little fires whenever they sprang up.

The fire came down the valley towards us like the end of the world, and we realised how little protection the creek would be. The air itself was burning.

We fled then, at last, pushing ourselves, coughing in the choking smoke, ran down the hill until we reached the creek, and we lay down in it, with only our heads above the water.

From the inferno we saw them hatch from the flames, and rise, and fly.
They reminded me of birds, pecking at the flaming ruins of the house on the hill. I saw one of them lift its head, and call out triumphantly. I could hear it over the crackling of the burning leaves, over the roar of the flames. I heard the call of the phoenix, and I understood that nothing lasts for ever.

A hundred birds of fire ascended into the skies as the creek-water began to boil.



"If August could speak, what would it say?" @neilhimself

VIII

@gabiottasnest

"August would speak of its empire lasting forever whilst glancing, warily, at the leaves cooking on the trees."

September

IX

My mother had a ring in the shape of a lion's head. She used it to do small magics – find parking spaces, make the queue she was in at the supermarket move a bit faster, make the squabbling couple at the next table stop squabbling and fall in love again, that sort of thing. She left it to me when she died.

The first time I lost it I was in a cafe. I think I had been fiddling with it nervously, pulling it off my finger, putting it on again. Only when I got home did I realise that I was no longer wearing it.

I returned to the cafe, but there was no sign of it.

Several days later, it was returned to me by a taxi driver, who had found it on the pavement outside the cafe. He told me my mother had appeared to him in a dream and given him my address and her recipe for old-fashioned cheesecake.

The second time I lost the ring I was leaning over a bridge, idly tossing pinecones into the river below. I didn't think it was loose, but the ring left my hand with a pinecone. I watched its arc as it fell. It landed in the wet dark mud at the edge of the river with a loud pollup noise, and was gone.

A week later, I bought a salmon from a man I met in the pub: I collected it from a cooler in the back of his ancient green van. It was for a birthday dinner. When I cut the salmon open, my mother's lion ring tumbled out.

The third time I lost it, I was reading and sunbathing in the back garden.
It was August. The ring was on the towel beside me, along with my dark glasses and some suntan lotion, when a large bird (I suspect it was a magpie or a jackdaw,
but I may be wrong. It was definitely a corvid of some kind) flew down, and flapped away with my mother's ring in its beak.

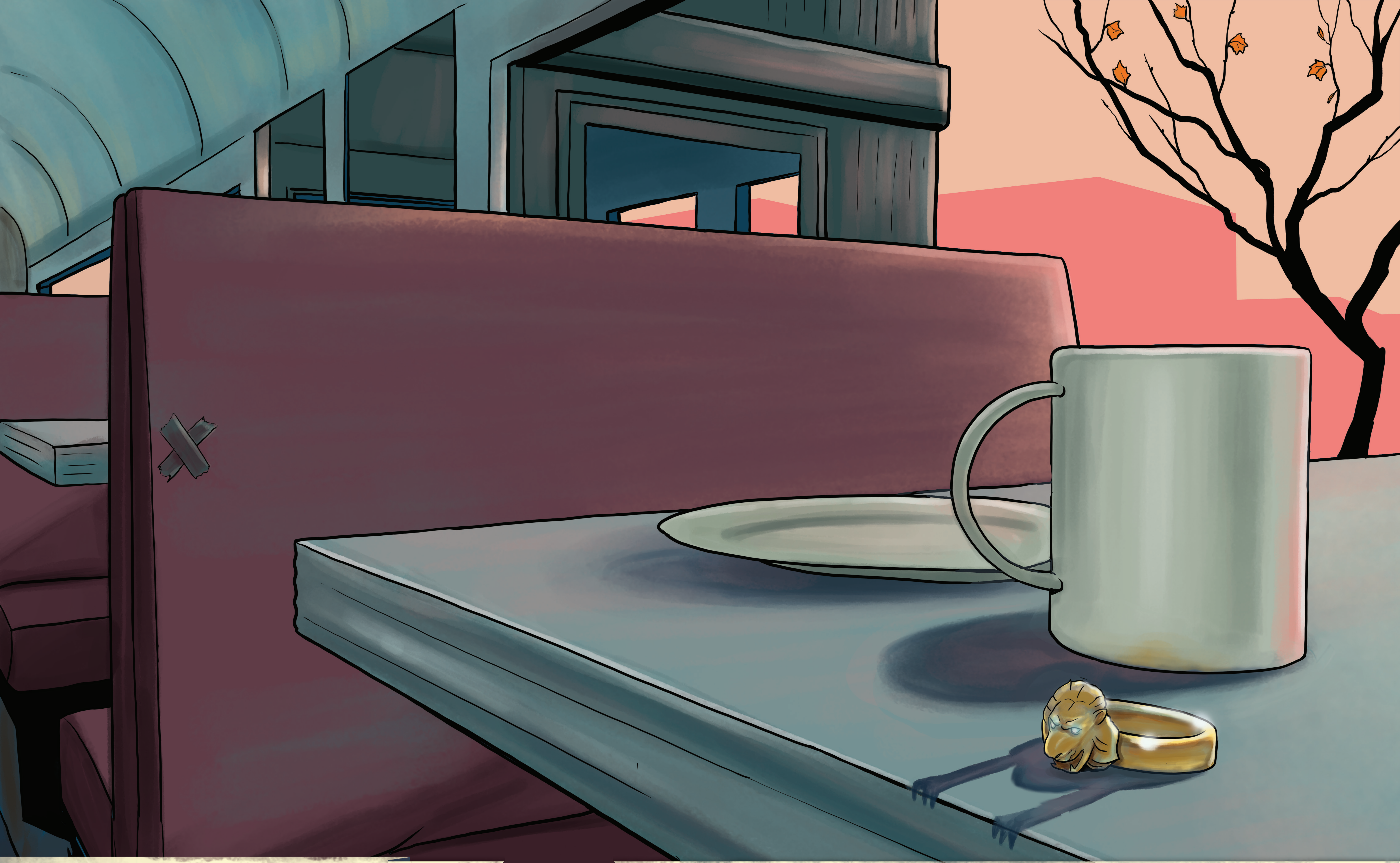
The ring was returned the following night by a scarecrow, awkwardly animated. He gave me quite a start as he stood there, unmoving under the back door light, and he lurched off into the darkness once again as soon as I had taken the ring from his straw-stuffed glove hand.

"Some things aren't meant to be kept," I told myself.

The next morning, I put the ring into the glove compartment of my old car.
I drove the car to a wrecker, and I watched, satisfied, as the car was crushed into a cube of metal the size of an old television set, and then put in a container to be shipped to Romania, where it would be processed into useful things.

In early September I cleared out my bank account. I moved to Brazil, where I took a job as a web designer under an assumed name.

So far there's been no sign of mother's ring. But sometimes I wake from a deep sleep with my heart pounding, soaked in sweat, wondering how she's going to give it back to me next time.



“Tell me something you lost @neilhimself
in September that meant a lot to you?”

IX

@TheGhostRegion
“My mother’s lion ring, lost & found 3 times over…
Some things aren’t meant to be kept”

October

X

“That feels good,” I said, and I stretched my neck to get out the last of the cramp.

It didn’t just feel good, it felt great, actually. I’d been squashed up inside that lamp for so long. You start to think that nobody’s ever going to rub it again.

“You’re a genie,” said the young lady with the polishing-cloth in her hand.

“I am. You’re a smart girl, toots. What gave me away?”

“The appearing in a puff of smoke,” she said. “And you look like a genie. You’ve got the turban and the pointy shoes.

I folded my arms and blinked. Now I was wearing blue jeans, grey sneakers, and a faded grey sweater: the male uniform of this time and this place. I raised a hand to my forehead, and I bowed deeply.

“I am the genie of the lamp,” I told her. “Rejoice, O fortunate one. I have it in my power to grant you three wishes. And don’t try the ‘I wish for more wishes’ thing – I won’t play and you’ll lose a wish. Right. Go for it.”

I folded my arms again.

“No,” she said. “I mean thanks and all that, but it’s fine. I’m good.”

“Honey,” I said. “Toots. Sweetie. Perhaps you misheard me. I’m a genie. And the three wishes? We’re talking anything you want. You ever dreamed of flying? I can give you wings. You want to be wealthy, richer than Croesus? You want power? Just say it. Three wishes. Whatever you want.”

“Like I said,” she said, “Thanks. I’m fine. Would you like something to drink? You must be parched after spending so much time in that lamp. Wine? Water? Tea?”

“Uh...” Actually, now she came to mention it, I was thirsty. “Do you have any mint tea?”

She made me some mint tea in a teapot that was almost a twin to the lamp in which I’d spent the greater part of the last thousand years.

“Thank you for the tea.”

“No problem.”

“But I don’t get it. Everyone I’ve ever met, they start asking for things. A fancy house. A harem of gorgeous women – not that you’d want that, of course...”

“I might,” she said. “You can’t just make assumptions about people. Oh, and don’t call me toots, or sweetie or any of those things. My name’s Hazel.”

“Ah!” I understood. “You want a beautiful woman then? My apologies. You have but to wish. ” I folded my arms.

“No,” she said. “I’m good. No wishes. How’s the tea?”

I told her that the mint tea was the finest I had ever tasted.

She asked me when I had started feeling a need to grant people’s wishes, and whether I felt a desperate need to please. She asked about my mother, and I told her that she could not judge me as she would judge mortals, for I was a djinn, powerful and wise, magical and mysterious.

She asked me if I liked hummus, and when I said that I did, she toasted a pita bread, and sliced it up, for me to dip into the hummus.

I dipped my bread slices into the hummus, and ate it with delight. The hummus gave me an idea.

“Just make a wish,” I said, helpfully, “and I could have a meal fit for a sultan brought in to you. Each dish would be finer than the one before, and all served upon golden plates. And you could keep the plates afterwards.”

“It’s good,” she said, with a smile. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

We walked together through the town. It felt good to stretch my legs after so many years in the lamp. We wound up in a public park, sitting on a bench by a lake.
It was warm, but gusty, and the autumn leaves fell in flurries each time the wind blew.

I told Hazel about my youth as a djinn, of how we used to eavesdrop on the angels and how they would throw comets at us if they spied us listening. I told her of the bad days of the djinn-wars, and how King Suleiman had imprisoned us inside hollow objects: bottles, lamps, clay pots, that kind of thing.

She told me of her parents, who were both killed in the same plane crash, and who had left her the house. She told me of her job, illustrating children's books, a job she had backed into, accidentally, at the point she realised she would never be a really competent medical illustrator, and of how happy she became whenever she was sent a new book to illustrate. She told me she taught life drawing to adults at the local community college one evening a week.

I saw no obvious flaw in her life, no hole that she could fill by wishing, save one.

"Your life is good," I told her. "But you have no one to share it with. Wish, and I will bring you the perfect man. Or woman. A film star. A rich... person..."

"No need. I'm good," she said.

We walked back to her house, past houses dressed for Hallowe'en.

"This is not right," I told her. "People always want things."

"Not me. I've got everything I need."

"Then what do I do?"

She thought for a moment. Then she pointed at her front yard. "Can you rake the leaves?"

"Is that your wish?"

"Nope. Just something you could do while I'm getting our dinner ready."

I raked the leaves into a heap by the hedge, to stop the wind from blowing it apart. After

dinner, I washed up the dishes. I spent the night in Hazel's spare bedroom.

It wasn't that she didn't want help. She let me help. I ran errands for her, picked up art supplies and groceries. On days she had been painting for a long time,
she let me rub her neck and shoulders. I have good, firm hands.

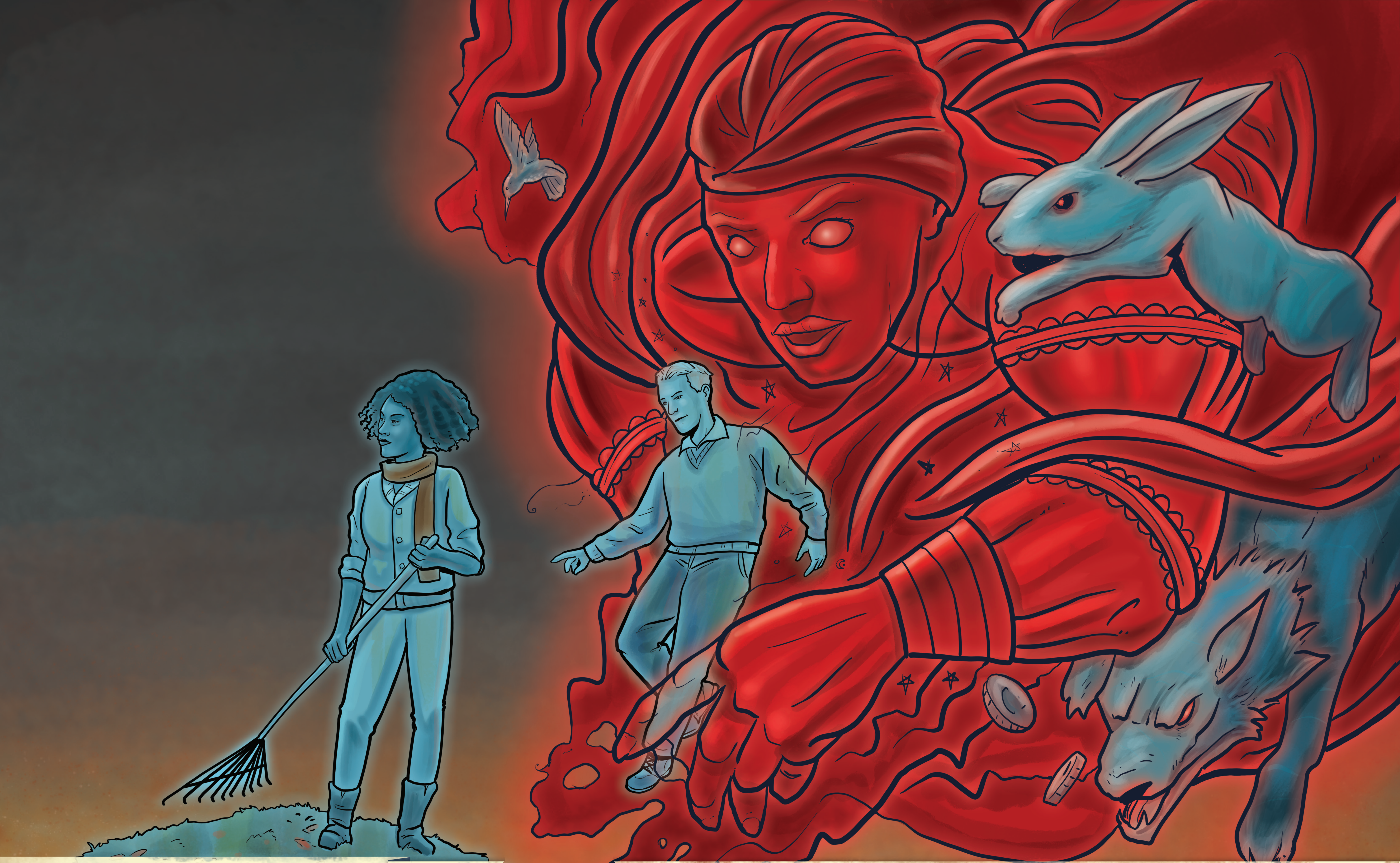
Shortly before Thanksgiving I moved out of the spare bedroom, across the hall, into the main bedroom, and Hazel's bed.

I watched her face this morning as she slept. I stared at the shapes her lips make when she sleeps. The creeping sunlight touched her face, and she opened her eyes and stared at me, and she smiled.

"You know what I never asked," she said. "Is what about you? What would you wish for if I asked what your three wishes were?"

I thought about it for a moment. I put my arm around her, and she snuggled her head into my shoulder.

"It's okay," I told her. "I'm good."



"What mythical creature would you like to meet in October? (& why?)" @neilhimself

X

@elainelowe

"A djinn. Not to make a wish. But for the very best advice on how to be happy w/what you already have."

November

XI

The brazier was small and square and made of an aged and fire-blackened metal that might have been copper or brass. It had caught Eloise's eye at the garage sale because it was twined with animals that might have been dragons and might have been sea-snakes. One of them was missing its head.

It was only a dollar, and Eloise bought it, along with a red hat with a feather on the side. She began to regret buying the hat even before she got home, and thought perhaps she would give it to someone as a gift. But the letter from the hospital had been waiting for her when she got home, and she put the brazier in the back garden and the hat in the closet as you went into the house, and had not thought of either of them again.

The months had passed, and so had the desire to leave the house. Every day made her weaker, and each day took more from her. She moved her bed to the room downstairs, because it hurt to walk, because she was too exhausted to climb the stairs, because it was simpler.

November came, and with it the knowledge that she would never see Christmas.

There are things you cannot throw away, things you cannot leave for your loved ones to find when you are gone. Things you have to burn.

She took a black cardboard folder filled with papers and letters and old photographs out into the garden. She filled the brazier with fallen twigs and brown paper shopping bags, and she lit it with a barbecue lighter. Only when it was burning did she open the folder.

She started with the letters, particularly the ones she would not want other people to see. When she had been at university there had been a professor and a relationship, if you could call it that, which had gone very dark, and very wrong very fast. She had all his letters paperclipped together, and she dropped them, one by one into the flames. There was a photograph of the two of them together, and she dropped it into the brazier last of all, and watched it curl and blacken.
She was reaching for the next thing in the cardboard folder when she realised that she could not remember the professor's name, or what he taught, or why the relationship had hurt her as it did, left her almost suicidal for the following year.

The next thing was a photograph of her old dog, Lassie, on her back beside the oak tree in the backyard. Lassie was dead these seven years, but the tree was still there, leafless now in the November chill. She tossed the photograph onto the brazier. She had loved that dog.

She glanced over to the tree, remembering...

There was no tree in the back yard.

There wasn't even a tree stump; only a faded November lawn, strewn with fallen leaves from the trees next door.

Eloise saw it, and she did not worry that she had gone mad. She got up, stiffly and walked into the house. Her reflection in the mirror shocked her, as it always did these days. Her hair so thin, so sparse, her face so gaunt.

She picked up the papers from the table beside her makeshift bed: a letter from her oncologist was on the top, beneath it a dozen pages of numbers and words. There were more papers beneath it, all with the hospital logo on the top of the first page. She picked them up and, for good measure, she picked up the hospital bills as well. Insurance covered so much of it, but not all.

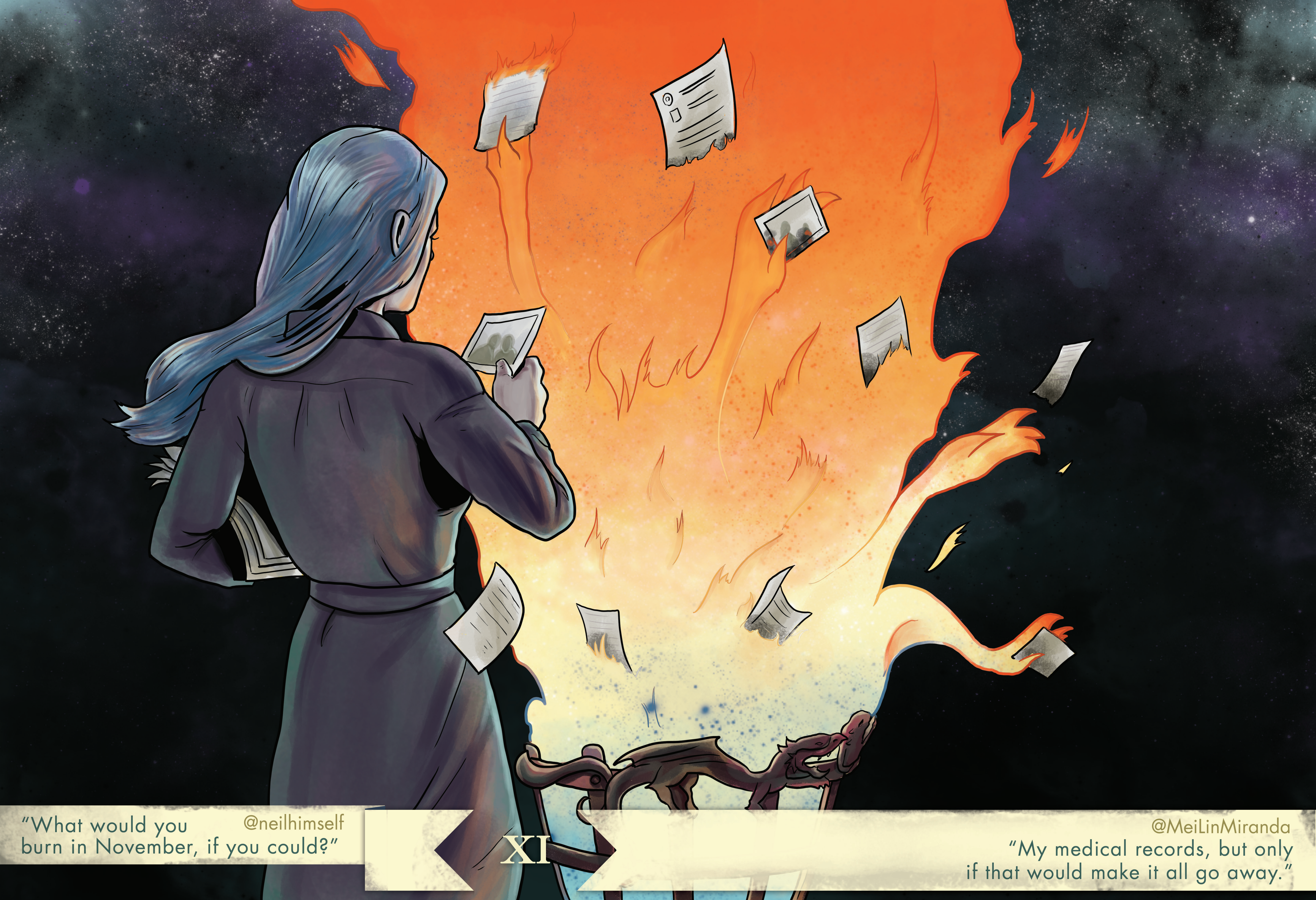
She walked back outside, pausing in the kitchen to catch her breath.

The brazier waited, and she threw her medical information into the flames.
She watched them brown and blacken and turn to ash on the November wind.

Eloise got up, when the last of the medical records had burned away, and she walked inside. The mirror in the hall showed her an Eloise both familiar and new: she had thick brown hair, and she smiled at herself from the looking glass as if she loved life and trailed comfort in her wake.

Eloise went to the hall closet. There was a red hat on the shelf she could barely remember, but she put it on, worried that the red might make her face look washed out and sallow. She looked in the mirror. She appeared just fine.
She tipped the hat at a jauntier angle.

Outside the last of the smoke from the black snake-wound brazier drifted on the chilly November air.



"What would you burn in November, if you could?"

@neilhimself

XI

@MeiLinMiranda

"My medical records, but only if that would make it all go away."

December

XII

Summer on the streets is hard, but you can sleep in a park in the summer without dying from the cold. Winter is different. Winter can be lethal. And even if it isn't, the cold still takes you as its special homeless friend, and it insinuates itself into every part of your life.

Donna had learned from the old hands. The trick, they told her, is to sleep wherever you can during the day – the Circle line is good, buy a ticket and ride all day, snoozing in the carriage, and so are the kinds of cheap cafes where they don't mind an eighteen year old girl spending fifty pence on a cup of tea and then dozing off in a corner for an hour or three, as long as she looks more or less respectable – but to keep moving at night, when the temperatures plummet, and the warm places close their doors, and lock them, and turn off the lights.

It was nine at night and Donna was walking. She kept to well-lit areas, and she wasn't ashamed to ask for money. Not any more. People could always say no, and mostly they did.

There was nothing familiar about the woman on the street corner. If there had been, Donna wouldn't have approached her. It was her nightmare, someone from Biddenden seeing her like this: the shame, and the fear that they'd tell her mum (who never said much, who only said "good riddance" when she heard gran had died) and then her mum would tell her dad, and he might just come down here and look for her, and try to bring her home. And that would break her. She didn't ever want to see him again.

The woman on the corner had stopped, puzzled, and was looking around as if she was lost. Lost people were sometimes good for change, if you could tell them the way to where they wanted to go.

Donna stepped closer, and said, "Spare any change?"

The woman looked down at her. And then the expression on her face changed and she looked like... Donna understood the cliché then, understood why people would say She

looked like she had seen a ghost. She did. The woman said, "You?"

"Me?" said Donna. If she had recognised the woman she might have backed away, she might even have run off, but she didn't know her. The woman looked a little like Donna's mum, but kinder, softer, plump where Donna's mum was pinched. It was hard to see what she really looked like because she was wearing thick black winter clothes, and a thick woollen bobble cap, but her hair beneath the cap was as orange as Donna's own.

The woman said, "Donna." Donna would have run then, but she didn't, she stayed where she was because it was just too crazy, too unlikely, too ridiculous for words.

The woman said, "Oh god. Donna. You are you, aren't you? I remember." Then she stopped. She seemed to be blinking back tears.

Donna looked at the woman, as an unlikely, ridiculous idea filled her head, and she said, "Are you who I think you are?"

The woman nodded. "I'm you," she said. "Or I will be. One day. I was walking this way remembering what it was like back when I... when you..." Again she stopped. "Listen. It won't be like this for you for ever. Or even for very long. Just don't do anything stupid. And don't do anything permanent. I promise it will be all right. Like the YouTube videos, you know? It Gets Better."

"What's a you tube?" asked Donna.

"Oh, lovey," said the woman. And she put her arms around Donna and pulled her close and held her tight.

"Will you take me home with you?" asked Donna.

"I can't," said the woman. "Home isn't there for you yet. You haven't met any of the people who are going to help you get off the street, or help you get a job. You haven't met the person who's going to turn out to be your partner. And you'll both make a place that's safe, for each other and for your children. Somewhere warm."

Donna felt the anger rising inside her. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked. "So you know it gets better. To give you hope."

Donna stepped back. “I don’t want hope,” she said. “I want somewhere warm.
I want a home. I want it now. Not in twenty years.”

A hurt expression on the placid face. “It’s sooner than twen--”

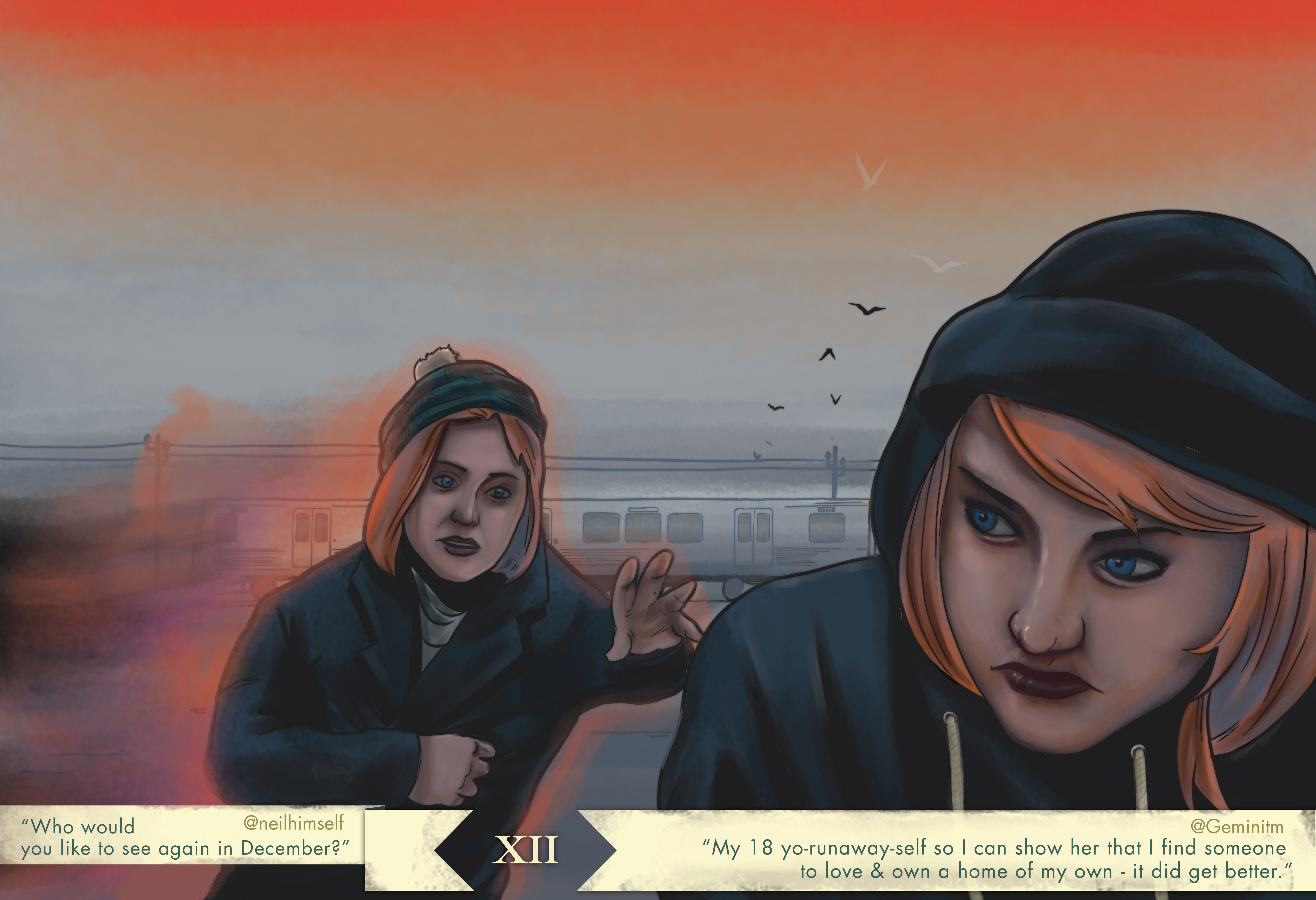
“I don’t care! It’s not tonight. I don’t have anywhere to go. And I’m cold.
Have you got any change?”

The woman nodded. “Here,” she said. She opened her purse and took out a twenty pound note. Donna took it, but the money didn’t look like any currency she was familiar with. She looked back at the woman to ask her something, but she was gone, and when Donna looked back at her hand, so was the money.

She stood there shivering. The money was gone, if it had ever been there.
But she had kept one thing: she knew it would all work out someday. In the end. And she knew that she didn’t need to do anything stupid. She didn’t have to buy one last Underground ticket just to be able to jump down onto the tracks when she saw a train coming, too close to stop.

The winter wind was bitter, and it bit her and it cut her to the bone, but still,
she spotted something blown up against a shop doorway, and she reached down and picked it up: a five pound note. Perhaps tomorrow would be easier.
She didn’t have to do any of the things she had imagined herself doing.

December could be lethal, when you were out on the streets. But not this year.
Not tonight.



"Who would you like to see again in December?" @neilhimself

XII

@Geminitm

"My 18 yo-runaway-self so I can show her that I find someone to love & own a home of my own - it did get better."